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U.S. Expects Sudan's New Military Rulers To Maintain Stability, Pro-West Stance

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Last weekend's military coup in Sudan solves one problem—the erratic leadership of deposed President Gaafar Nimeiri—but leaves the country vulnerable to continuing external and internal political pressure.

U.S. officials in Washington predict that the new military leadership headed by Defense Minister Abdel-Rahman Suwar el-Dahab will maintain internal stability and pro-Western policies in the short run. But they also foresee a period of political jockeying in which dissident junior officers and intellectuals—perhaps with Libyan backing—may seek power.

The new Sudanese leader signaled a desire to maintain Mr. Nimeiri's pro-Western policies during a meeting yesterday with the senior American diplomat in Khartoum, David Shinn. According to a State Department official, the Sudanese leader said he wants "good relations" with the U.S. and was assured by Mr. Shinn that the U.S. plans to continue its economic and military assistance program.

The U.S. has an important stake in the future of Sudan because it lies next to the two major American allies in the Arab world—Egypt and Saudi Arabia—and because the U.S. has made Sudan a test of its ability to contain Libya's Col. Muammar Qadhafi. But for all its strategic importance, Sudan's real nemesis is its chronically poor and mismanaged economy, and American experts doubt that the new military government will have much more success in this area, at least initially, than did the old.

American officials who have met Gen. Suwar el-Dahab describe him as "quiet-spoken," "thoughtful," and "apolitical." Says one Pentagon official who has met with him several times: "Suwar el-Dahab is a professional military man and he'll keep along those lines as long as it's in his power to do so."

U.S. officials regard Gen. Suwar el-Dahab as the front man for a group of five top military officers who seized power on Saturday. The other officers include the commanders responsible for logistics, administration and operations, as well as the chief of Sudanese intelligence. One Pentagon official describes the group as "truly a coalition."

U.S. officials believe that Gen. Suwar el-Dahab and his colleagues decided to seize power because they feared that un-

rest among Sudanese intellectuals and workers was spreading into the military. Intelligence reports of this military unrest, rather than last week's general strike by civilians, triggered the coup, according to one Pentagon official.

Libya, which had tried repeatedly to organize coups of its own against Mr. Nimeiri, is sure to try to take advantage of his downfall. The Libyans welcomed the coup and immediately recognized the new government, but U.S. officials regard the Libyans as opportunists who are seeking to benefit from the situation, rather than as instigators of the coup. "There isn't any indication that the Libyans had a hand in it," says one State Department official.

The real Libyan opportunity could come during the next several months, as the new military leadership prepares what it claims will be a restoration of civilian rule. One U.S. official predicts that during this transition, there will be considerable "back-door politicking" as various factions—including those sympathetic to Libya—try to gather support within the military, which is likely to be the dominant power in Sudan for the foreseeable future.

The new military leadership takes control of a huge nation with chronic political and economic problems. In the years since he took power in 1969, Mr. Nimeiri tried nearly every tactic—embracing the Soviet Union and then the U.S., propounding secular socialism and then his own eccentric brand of fundamentalist Islam—without much success. During the past two years, the nation's basic political problems seemed to get worse, especially the tension between the Moslem northern half of the country and the Christian-Animist south.

Mr. Nimeiri's shortcomings as a leader are chronicled in a new book by Mansour Khalid, a former cabinet minister. He argues that Mr. Nimeiri maintained a corrupt and politically confused regime that was prey to what he calls "the palace shoplifters." He contends that as Mr. Nimeiri's policies flailed back and forth, the country's development plans became muddled and its Sudanese Socialist Union political leadership little more than "a host of cheerleaders occupied in emotive rhetoric."

The key problem for the new leadership will be to prevent further deterioration of Sudan's economic position. The problems are daunting: Sudan's debt is as big as its gross national product and its debt service

outstrips its total foreign-exchange earnings. The internal economic changes that most Western economists think Sudan needs are politically unpopular—and helped provoke last week's rioting.

The U.S. continued publicly to stand by Mr. Nimeiri until the end. But American officials had believed for months that a coup was increasingly possible. Because of these concerns, notes a Pentagon official, the U.S. during the past year tried to make clear that its relationship was with "the government of Sudan, rather than Mr. Nimeiri."

Mr. Nimeiri's trip to Washington last week proved to be his last hurrah, but key American officials don't seem shaken by his political demise. One U.S. official notes that a coup by pro-Western military officers had been regarded by the U.S. as the "most-hoped-for" outcome in Sudan in the case Mr. Nimeiri was toppled.